I-90 Hyak to Easton Project

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"THE BULLETIN"

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CONCURRENCE

In January of 2000, the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), issued a notice of intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement, (EIS). Since that time, the department has been working with regulatory agencies, known as the Signatory Agency Committee (SAC), as part of an environmental permit streamlining agreement.

This agreement, which integrates the Clean Water Act Section 404 process and other permitting procedures into the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), is formally known as the NEPA/SEPA/404 Merger Agreement.

In any project involving fill into the waters of the United States, the requirements for assessing whether the action is appropriate are contained in Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is responsible for issuing the Section 404 permit, although many other federal agencies including the Environmental Protection Agency and the Fish & Wildlife Service are involved in this process.

Because major transportation projects are usually administered by many agencies and may be affected by a multitude of environmental requirements, practices such as the Merger Agreement provide the opportunity to expedite the decision-making route while emphasizing a cost-effective approach by avoiding duplication of process.

On February 12th 2001, we received concurrence from the SAC on Concurrence Point 1, which included EIS elements such as project purpose and need, project description, and criteria for alternative selection, and the roles of other agencies.

A concurrence point is a point within the process where the transportation agency requests formal concurrence. The signatory agencies can elect to concur, not concur, or decide not to participate at that stage. If there is concurrence, agencies are expected to furnish written determination that the information presented to date is adequate for this stage of development and the project may proceed to the next stage without modification. A finding of nonconcurrence would be a written determination that would provide an explanation for such action. In such an instance, agencies will attempt to resolve the issues informally before entering into conflict resolution.

PROJECT PURPOSE

As part of Concurrence Point 1, the project purpose statement has been revised. The new purpose statement is as follows:

"The purpose of the project is to meet projected traffic demands, improve public safety and meet the identified project needs in a 15-mile stretch of I-90 between the communities of Hyak and Easton."

PROJECT NEEDS

This portion of Interstate 90 is considered to be deficient in the following areas:

Avalanches - Closures due to avalanches and associated control work frequently strand motorists and freight on the pass, resulting in substantial safety hazards to the traveling public, travel delays, and impacts to the state's economy. The traveling public and movement of goods remains at risk as long as the problem is not addressed. The risk will increase exponentially to traffic growth.

Slope Instability - Interstate 90 has several unstable slopes which result in rock and debris

falling onto the roadway, causing damage to property and loss of life. These slopes will continue to pose a threat to property and safety if they are not addressed.

Structural Deficiencies – The pavement on Interstate 90 is beyond its design life and the roadway is in a state of rapid deterioration. If it is not fixed, continual deterioration of the roadway will result in unsafe driving conditions, increased vehicle damage, travel delay and eventual failure of the roadway.

Traffic Volumes – Traffic volumes on Interstate 90 are growing at an estimated three and one half percent per year. Currently these traffic volumes exceed the highway design capacity during peak travel periods. During the 20-year design period of the proposed action, traffic volumes are expected to double and this condition is expected to worsen. The worsened traffic situation will lead to higher accident rates, adverse economic impacts and increased travel times, which greatly reduces the ability of the interstate to function as a safe and efficient roadway.

Ecological Connectivity – Previous studies have identified the need to correct ecological connectivity barriers created by the existing I-90 facility in the vicinity of the proposed project. Enhancing and improving the biological permeability of the roadway corridor will help achieve the goals of the Northwest Forest Plan for improving ecological connectivity within the Snoqualmie Pass Adaptive Management Area. Improving connectivity across the I-90 corridor will help reduce demographic and genetic isolation of species and reduce the risks to wildlife and the public from vehicle/wildlife encounters.

INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE

On January 11, the I-90 Design Team met with representatives from some of the environmental agencies involved in the process. Held at the Ranger Station in Cle Elum, the gathering focused on ecological connectivity issues relating to the project.

The Forest Service supplied a hydrologist and two biologists to provide guidance. The Department of Fish and Wildlife were also present and offered their input.

Information and expertise on factors involved in high-mobility and low-mobility species movement was shared with the design team, as well as alignment, drainage and structural options for critical water passage sections.

Some of their findings related to the project as a whole, while others were tied specifically to sections of the corridor, identified as the primary opportunities to address connectivity. The stretch from Price Creek to Cedar Creek was rated the most crucial connectivity area of the entire project. The group agreed that this area should be scrutinized closely for prospects to address connectivity. Other areas of concern included the section from Coal Creek to Wolfe Creek, and the top of Easton Hill. Coal Creek was cited as an area providing a combination of habitat and topographical linkage opportunities.

At the close of the meeting, the participants agreed that the exchange had been enlightening. The environmental agency representatives have offered to continue to assist the design team in responding to some of the issues that will be involved with the EIS.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Watch for a Public Information Meeting on the Project Status in the late spring or early summer.

Give us your feedback on where you would like to have these meetings. We will attempt to schedule the meetings in direct response to the interest we receive.

YOU CAN USE A VARIETY OF METHODS TO CONTACT US:

IN WRITING: Paul Gonseth, Project Engineer
PO Box 12560
Yakima, WA 98909

E-MAIL: I90Snoq@wsdot.wa.gov

TOLL FREE TELEPHONE: 1-888-535-0738

WEBSITE:
wsdot.wa.gov/regions/southcentral/I90Snoqualmie